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RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0690
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4227
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 7781
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5341
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1205
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1125
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 001104

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SUBJECT: HOPE AND FEAR IN BURMA'S MON STATE

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Classified By: CDA Villarosa for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Charge visited Mawlamyaing, Burma's third largest city and capital of Mon State, November 11 and 12. She met with NLD party members, who described themselves as hopeful that change would come soon, but still distrustful of the Burmese military. They indicated that they have regular quiet discussions with the military and civilian authorities, which might account for the relatively restrained response against local protestors in September. A Catholic Bishop explained that while everyone wants change, the people do not know how to make this happen. Like other Burmese cities, the monks have disappeared from this major center of Buddhist studies, reportedly ordered to return to their homes. During the drive to Mawlamyaing, we passed over 40 military trucks headed east, which appeared loaded with rice. Our interlocutors in Mawlamyaing opined that this would be used to support Burmese Army and allied DKBA troops launching a dry season offensive against the Karens. One source reported that the prisoners in Mawlamyaing prison had been released to serve as porters for the Burmese Army in this offensive. End Summary.

Situation Getting Worse

¶2. (C) Everyone with whom we met described a grim situation getting worse. Mawlamyaing was once a busy, prosperous port city. During our drive we saw extensive rice fields, rubber plantations, and sugarcane fields. More recently, people have begun planting oil palm. None of these products move by sea. Most trade now consists of smuggled goods to and from Thailand transiting the region in trucks. One NLD member described the current situation as "no business, no jobs, no health, no education." Asked about the quality of hospitals, another replied that they were "only buildings with nothing in them." The Catholic Bishop of Mawlamyaing elaborated on the poverty afflicting his diocese, explaining that many villages had no men because they are working in Thailand. In addition, crony businessmen allied with the military took advantage of villagers lack of understanding of their rights

to confiscate their land. He had not heard of forced labor on the plantations, but said that villagers had to porter for the military and provide bamboo and thatch for shelters for the military at the onset of the rainy season.

13. (C) NLD members reported large protests in Mawlamyaing in September led by monks, with NLD assistance. The Bishop described the local military commanders as having a "good pulse" on the city, so they did not need to use violence to break up the demonstrations. Nor did anyone report any arrests; only one person was taken in for questioning and released the same day, according to NLD members. However, they said that most monks had been ordered to return to their homes. Mawlamyaing is a major center for Buddhist studies, and had an estimated 13,000 monks affiliated with 800 monasteries, according to our interlocutors. As in other Burmese cities now, we saw very few monks walking around town. The Bishop reported that the Karens had considered joining the September protests, which was different from their reaction in 1988. He considered this a sign that people were coming together against the military. However, he questioned whether young people would have the capacity to lead Burma given their lack of education. He added that the rural people do not care about politics, and just want to be left alone.

NLD Hopeful; Everyone Else Afraid

14. (C) Charge met with six NLD members living in Mawlamyaing to hear their views of recent political developments. They appeared well-briefed about the just concluded visit of UN Envoy Gambari and the statement he released from NLD General Secretary Aung San Suu Kyi, thanks to VOA and BBC radio

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broadcasts. They repeatedly referred to the need for a "time bound" political dialogue, which ASSK had mentioned in her statement. While doubting the Burmese military would change,

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they expressed hope that change would come soon. They did not have any set period in mind, although quickly responded negatively when Charge asked if they could wait ten more years. After discussing among themselves they settled on one year as an appropriate time frame.

15. (C) Charge asked about their plans for a future political transition. Although they claimed to be preparing for a transition, they seemed confused when asked what their priorities would be. When Charge noted they had discussed the problems of poverty, food shortages, health and education, one volunteered that inflation should be a priority. When Charge asked what he thought should be done to control inflation, he replied "control prices." They readily welcomed the prospect of technical assistance from the World Bank and other donors, once a real political transition got underway.

16. (C) Only seventeen people remain as formal members of the NLD in Mawlamyaing due to official harassment. However, they added that many more people are sympathetic to their activities, but are afraid to become active in NLD. The six Charge met said they sometimes get questioned about their activities two or three times a day. They expected to be questioned about their meeting with Charge, but did not expect any further problems claiming they were used to the intimidation. They have found the military and police somewhat sympathetic to their activities as well. They said lower level officers and troops were unhappy with the current situation, but were afraid of their higher ups. They also meet regularly to discuss the current situation with the local civilian authorities, whom they also described as sympathetic, but afraid. The Catholic Bishop confirmed that people were afraid, saying they want change, but they do not know how to make it happen. Everyone is afraid of the people

above them; they "count on U.S. support," he added.

Christian Ecumenism; No Muslims or Buddhists

¶17. (C) Catholic Bishop Raymong Saw Po Ray oversees a diocese that encompasses Mon State, Tennassarim Division, and the southern part of Karen State, with approximately 7000 Catholics, mostly ethnic Karen. He said most of his parishioners lived scattered throughout southern Burma with only two parishes of approximately 600 parishioners each in Mawlamyaing. He said that Muslims outnumber Christians in this area, but they are concentrated in the urban areas. Another person estimated the Muslims as making up 10-15 % of the population.

¶18. (C) Charge inquired about a new building under construction on his compound, since Christians and Muslims report difficulties around the country securing approvals. The Bishop agreed it was difficult, saying that the work often had to stop and start. He said the building would only be two stories, rather than the three the Church had sought. Authorities justified restrictions on the Christians by saying that otherwise they would have to give the same to the Muslims. The Bishop implied that the Christians ultimately faced fewer restrictions than the Muslims. Although we saw many large mosques around the city, most were in a state of poor repair with no visible new construction. Most of the churches, on the other hand, appeared in better condition.

¶19. (C) Noting the large number of religious buildings she saw in Mawlamyaing, Charge asked about contacts among the various religious leaders. The Bishop replied that Baptist, Anglican and Catholic leaders regularly met. However he added that they had cancelled their annual unity gathering in October due to the recent protests in order to avoid attracting negative attention by the military. The Christian leaders, he said, would try to hold the gathering in January when the memories of the recent demonstrations were less strong. He said the military authorities discourage contacts between Christians and Muslims, but the Christians had held some quiet discussions with individual monks.

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Karen Offensive Getting Underway

¶10. (C) Charge mentioned the 40 military trucks she had seen on the drive to Mawlamyaing to everyone she met, which appeared to be carrying bags of rice. Most said they were likely headed to Hpa-an in Karen State for the annual Burma Army offensive against the Karen insurgents. The Bishop speculated that some of the rice would be for DKBA troops allied with the Burma Army. One of the NLD members speculated that the rice might be for monks, but said most would refuse it. A former translator for ICRC said that prisoners from Mawlamyaing prison had been sent to Hpa-an to work as porters for the military (a common use of prisoners in Burma).

¶11. (C) Comment: Given the other reports we have received about a renewed offensive against the Karen, we feel certain the military trucks we observed were supplying the troops. On the return trip we saw maybe ten trucks carrying barrels and vegetables, but did not see any carrying crates or troops. The reports from Mawlamyaing NLD of discontent among lower level military and civilian officials tracks with what we have heard elsewhere. It gives some hope that in the event of a real political transition, local authorities might be helpful to smooth the transition. But everyone is still afraid. This shows how effectively fear keeps discontent from boiling over in Burma and the military keeps control. Instead people hope that the U.S. will come in and make change happen for them. Overcoming their fears will require significantly more unity among all the people than we have

seen here or anyplace else in Burma. End comment.
VILLAROSA